

The West Wing Weekly
5.08: "Shutdown"
Guest: Gene Sperling

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You've done it again. You've put on *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about season five, episode eight "Shutdown" or "How Josiah Got His Groove Back."

JOSH: It was written by Mark Goffman. A terrific fellow, very talented writer. Would later become exec producer of *Sleepy Hollow*, *Bull*, *White Collar*, and other great shows. This episode was directed by Christopher Misiano. And it first aired on November 19, 2003.

HRISHI: Coming up later we will be joined, once again, by Gene Sperling. He's the former director of the National Economic Council. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, by the way, was directed by Kevin Rodney Sullivan, who directed *The West Wing* episode "Lord John Marbury."

JOSH: Boom.

HRISHI: And, of course, it co-starred Taye Diggs.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: The world of *The West Wing* is so expansive and there's so many people who have been involved over the various seasons that, really, I feel like you can look up any big title, movie or TV, and find some connection to *The West Wing*.

JOSH: How far removed from Kevin Bacon is it.

HRISHI: Well, that's what I'm saying. I mean, not very far removed. We can get to Kevin Bacon in, y'know, zero steps.

JOSH: There ya go. That's all you really need. [Hrishi laughs] Well one step. Zero steps would be Kevin Bacon on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Ok, sure. In one step, yes. I was thinking while I was watching, "This episode is how Josiah got his groove back." And then I went and Googled "How Stella Got Her Groove Back West Wing" and immediately, first result: Kevin Rodney Sullivan, director of "Lord John Marbury."

JOSH: There it is.

HRISHI: This is a fun game actually. Pick something else.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Gimme another... Something from the 2000s.

JOSH: Something from the 2000s...

HRISHI: Or late 90s. Or whatever.

JOSH: A piece of work? *Heathers*?

HRISHI: *Heathers* is *not* from the 2000s.

JOSH: Well, isn't it 90s?

HRISHI: It's fine, I'll just do it without even looking it up. [cross talk] It's Christian Slater.

JOSH: [cross talk] Christian Slater. [both laugh] Yeah, I know, that was terrible. I answered it as I said it. [Hrishi laughs] That failed on every level.

HRISHI: Um, no. *Heathers* is from the 80s.

JOSH: I'm 52. Everything is from whatever.

HRISHI: [laughs] Alright. Well that's a good note to end this part of the discussion on. [Josh laughs] "Everything is from whatever." Here's what the whatever is on "Shutdown." I'm gonna read the Warner Brothers synopsis 'cause it's pretty good. "A disastrous financial crisis looms when the federal government is shut down after the President engages in a war of wills between the powerful GOP House Speaker over an extra two percent in budget reductions that would trim many of Bartlet's key social programs, and the Democrats are blamed because of opinion polls." That's a long sentence.

JOSH: You'd think I would've played a larger role in a "war of Wills."

HRISHI: [laughs] Continuing: "As Leo, Josh, and Toby send everyone home, they remain uneasy as the President refuses to compromise - until he arrives on a bold plan to personally and publicly challenge the Republicans in the halls of the Capitol. Meanwhile, Abbey suddenly reappears from her self-imposed exile for a State Dinner that she might have to cook herself."

JOSH: Woah-oh-oh-oh! I can't wait to see that [expletive deleted] scene! [both laugh]

HRISHI: This episode starts immediately on the heels of the previous episode. [cross talk] In fact there's a little bit of overlap.

HRISHI: Sorry, in fact there's even a little bit of an overlap. We get the end of the episode

JOSH: Just like we just had.

HRISHI: Hmm?

JOSH: I'm trying to create an overlap every time you're speaking. As a sort of really annoying recurring joke.

HRISHI: [laughing] Okay. Um...it actually....

JOSH: Yeah. I thought that you would like it. [Hrishi laughs] Alright, that's the final...I promise that's the final one...the real Josh Malina would now do this for the next hour until you literally...until it became an actual fight. And you're like, "dude." I've got, you know, I've got stuff to do today, but I'm not...I'm gonna suck it up.

HRISHI: Okay. Alright.

HRISHI: Well then you tell me what you think about the teaser.

[Cross talk] JOSH: Ah...Nice Well done.

HRISHI: You...[inaudible] [As a joke about cross talk]

JOSH: I'm not going to give it to you but it was a good effort.

HRISHI: Ok. [both laugh] No, really. What did you think?

JOSH: Really now? Ok! Last episode ended with a fairly good cliffhanger: Imminent shutdown, a call of a big bluff, or we don't know if it's a bluff, but y'know Bartlet essentially saying, "Fine. Shut it down."

HRISHI: President shut it down.

JOSH: Right. And we launch into what I find to be a *not* super credible scenario in the cold open, and indeed throughout much of the episode, which is that on the heels of this momentous decision on the part of the president, he washes his hands of any further involvement.

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Damn. I probably missed the first half.

LEO: Sorry?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Providence is gonna get a whooping from my fighting Irish.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I don't really... It's kind of stylish, the cold open, but I don't really buy it, that he wouldn't even chat with Leo. I mean this is a huge discussion that now has to happen, and the president is just gonna to check out, "I'll be watching basketball" as if there's nothing further to discuss. There's no strategy to devise. There's no briefing of his staff and Leo as to what his thinking is. He's just out of there: "I'm gonna go eat nuts and watch my team."

HRISHI: Charlie says, "Is he coming back?" [chuckles] And now I'm just imagining that's a series wrap for Martin Sheen.

[both laugh]

JOSH: That's funny. He's not coming back. It's just us now!

HRISHI: Stuck with this hand that he's given us. And then Leo ends the teaser. Toby asks, "Now what?" And Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

LEO: We shut it down.

[three dramatic drum hits]

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And once again we get the very dramatic drum hits that we had at the end of the last episode. But the end of the last episode was an actual cliffhanger. Here's he's just repeating information that we already know.

JOSH: And not only do we already know, even the characters who had just said what had happened, they know the answer. It's not even new to them so we can't even try to vicariously enjoy the bomb-swell through them. I find this to be a "bomb-splat."

HRISHI: [laughs] Bomb-splat. A triple bomb-splat.

JOSH: A pretty big one.

HRISHI: Punctuated by the triple drum hit.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: That didn't totally land. And as far as the president's escape to watch the Notre Dame game--

JOSH: Notre Game.

HRISHI: Notre Game. I felt like really it was just a way to set up so many basketball metaphors, and really sports metaphors. It's crazy to think that Aaron Sorkin wasn't involved in this episode because it is sports metaphors, or really it's basketball and poker metaphors, throughout the entire thing.

JOSH: Right. I'm going to object to an early poker reference as well.

HRISHI: Ah! I was wondering. There is a comment from Josh. He's talking about pro poker players in Atlantic City and he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Remember when I went to Atlantic City and I came back complaining that all the pro poker players suck all the fun out of the game? Those guys, they bet the bank when they have a good hand. And you either fold, or you go in all the way with them.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I wrote down as a question to ask you.

JOSH: Yes. Well I wrote down, "Boy do I want to play poker with Josh Lyman."

HRISHI: [laughs] So can you unpack what he's trying to say? Or what's going on there?

JOSH: Yeah, I guess he's trying to say these guys, when they feel they have leverage, when they have the winning hand, they really go for it. We're playing, y'know, this is all-in poker. But of course, bet sizing is an important element of playing poker at a high level. And if you simply bet everything you had only when you had a great hand, everyone would know you had a great hand and they would fold to you. So, y'know, there's something called value betting which is based on either the knowledge or the supposition that you have the winning hand, you bet for value trying to get inferior hands to call you. [chuckles] Y'know it's a very surface level conception of poker...

HRISHI: That if you have a good hand... [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah, that if you have a good hand you bet *everything*. [Hrishi laughs] And if you have a terrible hand, you always fold. There are players who are like that. They're called

nits. They play very, very tightly and they tend not to get paid off when they have a good hand because you know that guy only bets when he's really got the nuts. No, there's nothing wrong with having a character reveal himself to know nothing about poker [Hrishi laughs], but I think the moment is not conceptualized that way. We're supposed to kind of be impressed with... y'know the guy, the veteran, the wily fox Josh Lyman is y'know explaining to a neophyte how it works.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So that one fell short for me.

HRISHI: He's Lymansplaining and really, Donna tells us, he only played one hand in Atlantic City.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah. Right, well then again, yeah, maybe he's simply making that classic mistake of extrapolating from a very, very small pool of data and creating a greater portrayal of something of that which he does not know enough.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. For the first time ever Josh has decided to form an opinion based on very little experience or understanding.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And then tell Donna. Again, there's another purpose to the poker metaphor here, more than just revealing how little Josh knows about poker strategy. He says, "I think the president stays in." And I think really what he says is, "Either you fold or you go all the way with them." He's just giving us an early look about the division within the senior staff. He's talking about the rest of the staff when he talks about people folding. And then going in all the way with them, is himself. He's ready to go all the way with the president.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Which won't pay off 'til much later. Or "pay out" I guess is the poker term.

JOSH: Well, I mean, this is what I find lacks credibility. Sort of overall about this episode is the idea that Bartlet wouldn't even share his thinking with the rest of the staff for most of the episode. They kind of try to vamp and buy time trying to figure out what they should do, but they can't even consult the president. It's just a weird... I don't know, I feel like this episode has a framework that could have made for a wonderful and compelling episode and great storyline, but it somehow lacks the sophistication of the earlier iteration of *The West Wing*. And this is the first time I really felt it very tangibly throughout an episode.

HRISHI: Hmm. Well that's interesting because did you feel that way when the president had his hot mic moment?

[West Wing Episode 3.16 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I think we might be talking about a .22 caliber mind in a .357 magnum world.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I thought of that a few times here because again he had strategy there and he let it play out and he never let anyone know. He never said, "I did that on purpose, and I wanted to see if that was gonna jumpstart things in a way that I wanted." Until, y'know, C.J. in the end souses it out much like she does in this episode.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's a stratagem, but it's not—

JOSH: That's an interesting parallel and I would have to say that I *didn't* feel that way about the first episode to which you refer. And I'm trying to figure out why. It's hard for me to reverse engineer in my own mind. My guess is it played out somehow more cleverly in that episode. I mean in this episode they are... Well, I guess my take on this episode is that it's not that President Bartlet had a stratagem that was just so fiendishly clever that it was bound to work. My impression watching is that ultimately it was the walk to Capitol Hill and then the decision to walk out...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It was optics, but not optics that Bartlet could have known about in the Roosevelt Room when he said, "No, no. No 3%." So.

HRISHI: And they're not even ones that he came up with; those were Josh's ideas.

JOSH: Right. Exactly. And again, I think there's also those moments... *that* moment, the way it was handled, also to me it had a certain lack of sophistication. I don't know why. It kind of started to get me back inside this episode when President Bartlet got out to speak to some tourists who may be disappointed that certain museums or whatever, musea, were shut down. And then decides to make the walk to Capitol Hill, that seems like a good decision on the fly. And then the decision to leave. But why have that moment, where we the audience see Josh Lyman say:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Let's go. Right now.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I think we're going from a *West Wing* that I always lauded for being one step ahead of the audience, to an episode where frequently the audience is two steps ahead of the show.

HRISHI: Hm.

JOSH: Why spoon feed that to us? Why not have Haffley in the office saying, "No, we're not going out there. We'll keep him waiting. Let's just get on the same page here." And us start to believe that President Bartlet's sitting there like a turkey losing the optic war, and just have them go out when they're finally ready, the Republicans, and realize that Bartlet's gone, or maybe still catch them walking out. But why telegraph that moment to us?

HRISHI: Yeah, I think I understand why you would want the more dramatic unfolding of that moment, but I think the reason why we saw it, is because this is not just an episode about the president getting his groove back, it's an episode about Josh getting his groove back and they wanted to show us that Josh's ideas aren't limited just to 1) sticking behind the president and 2) walking to the... He executed the entire play, he called it. I think again it's paying off this basketball metaphor.

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: They've got a 7 foot center and the best power forward in the game, why zone?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Like why play zone defense? And I think he's yelling at the coach, and here Josh gets to be the coach and really see the whole board.

JOSH: I definitely thought of that element as I watched it, but I'm quite sure, I can even think of a couple approaches, there would have either been a way to pay off after the moment that Josh had conceptualized the walkout, or even we could have had, and I think this what would have happened in the first four seasons of the show, we would have seen a look in Josh's eye that tells us...

HRISHI: It was his idea? [Josh snaps his fingers.]

JOSH: Y'know before it happens... "something."

HRISH: Oooh ohoh oh. I see.

JOSH: Y'know he might... Bartlet would look stricken, and Josh would say, "Hang on, I got an idea." Y'know that's the bad version. But it would be something like that. It'd be a line, a better

line than that. But something that says, “Hang on, wait a minute, I got an idea” or a look in his eye. Then we’d cut to Haffley’s room. Then they’d come out, and we’d realize Josh’s idea was like “let’s not wait for them.” But a better version.

HRISHI: Yeah, I could imagine even seeing what we see, which is Josh sitting down next to the president and whispering something into his ear without actually hearing what it is that he says.

JOSH: Yeah, that’s right. That’s exactly right. That’s I think how it could have and would have been handled better previously.

HRISHI: Mm. I was swept away in it, I dug it.

[Crosstalk] JOSH: No, that’s good! Then again you’re an enormous fan of the post-Sorkin years.

HRISHI: [chuckles] Right. I was so caught up in the plot and, also, just really I just do love the episodes when characters make a comeback. I think I was a bit of a sucker for this one. Here we’ve got *both* the president *and* Josh figuring it out and I love that. I love when C.J. comes back Oliver Babish says to her:

[West Wing Episode 3.04 excerpt]

OLIVER: I was going to say, you took a beating the last few months...

C.J.: Yeah.

OLIVER: And I was wondering if you were trying to get back in the game with one swing.

C.J.: Is that what you were wondering?

OLIVER: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Those moments. And like Sam being a blood enemy to Kevin Kahn. And sending the motorcade down the thing to... Y’know? I love all these moments when people come back. So, I dug it.

JOSH: Interesting actually. What you’re saying speaks to an attempt, I think, that was less successful for me than for you, but an attempt on the part now of Wells and company to create Aaron-like moments of redemption. To me, I was more struck by the *attempt* and I thought they fell short. But I can see why it would appeal to somebody who’s a hardcore fan of Aaron’s version of *The West Wing*. That’s actually intriguing.

HRISHI: I remember in an interview that I saw with John Wells at one point, I think he said that in season five the writers were kind of a cover band, an Aaron Sorkin cover band. And I haven't really felt that so much in the previous episodes because the doldrums of those episodes were so different from Sorkin years. But then this episode does have so many callbacks and so many things that are of the same textures as those episodes. This is the first time that I feel like, "Ah, the cover band thing makes sense here. You're playing all the right notes." Even ending the episode with the President saying, "What's next?" This is what a *West Wing* episode is supposed to look and feel like.

JOSH: Huh. So I feel like we're just having different reactions to the same phenomenon.

HRISHI: I mean, I think two people can see a cover band play and one person can be like, "Well it's not the band. Y'know these aren't the guys who created this music." And then another person can just be like, "I love this song."

JOSH: Yeah, well. Fair enough, fair enough. To me, it pointed out contrasts.

HRISHI: And I don't disagree with you at the same time. Yeah.

JOSH: I wrote a lot of moments. I wrote down the phrase *Schoolhouse Rock* more than once in this episode.

[Schoolhouse Rock song "I'm Just a Bill" excerpt]

THE BILL: [sung] I'm just a bill, yes I'm only a bill, and I got as far as Capitol Hill

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It felt just a little bit... things were being too spoon fed to me. By the way, huge fan of *Schoolhouse Rock*. But now that I'm 52, I enjoy them for nostalgia's sake rather than to learn from them. [chuckles] One bit of dialogue, an interchange, that I wrote down was Roy saying:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

ROY: They caved, we won. How much more leverage do we need until we start governing again?

HAFFLEY: We are governing. We're slowing the rate of federal spending increases; we're stopping this president from driving this country deeper into debt and leaving our children to pay for it; we're doing what we told the voters we would do if they elected us.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It just didn't sound to me like what Aaron would have had these guys say.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: I prefer to be struggling to keep up with what these guys are discussing.

HRISHI: Mhm, mhm. By the way, in terms of the federal spending, at one point C.J. asks, y'know, what are the actual numbers. And one of the reporters asks, "What's 1%?" And she gives an answer... She kind of deflects without knowing what the actual numbers are. And what do I know really? I'm not entirely sure. But in 2003, when this episode aired, the federal budget's expenditures for that year was \$2.13 trillion. So just 1% is \$21.3 billion.

JOSH: Hm.

[West Wing Episode 5.07 excerpt]

JOSH: Well, you're forgetting the beauty of the federal budget process.

DONNA: What's that?

JOSH: No one understands it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I'm sure I'm getting something wrong here, but let me interrupt your gripe fest a little bit.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: That discussion about Josh's arc in this episode, which I really like. The laptop scene with Josh and Donna's really funny I thought.

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Okay, take my laptop. Start a tally of programs affected by the shutdown, and email it to me as you go. Don't read anything in the folder marked "private." [pause] Don't take my laptop.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I liked it too.

HRISHI: "Don't look in the folder called 'private.' Don't take my laptop." [both laugh]

JOSH: Yeah, I liked that.

HRISHI: I also loved that the conversation continues and then the scene ends and Josh leaves, and then Donna leaves. But, this is a great detail, right as she's leaving, Donna casts one uneasy glance in the direction of the laptop which is off-camera. Like she's still thinking and possibly worried about what might be in that folder.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: It's a *tiny* moment but it's a great non-verbal button for that scene.

JOSH: Yes. What is the moment when Donna says, "Seriously?"

HRISHI: When Josh tells her that she has to go home. That when Leo said everyone below Special Assistant has to go home, it includes her.

JOSH: Janel's reaction is priceless to me. There's just about nine different emotions that are going on. She's bemused, she's a little bit amused. There's the connection to Josh and she's gonna really have to go. There's just so much going on. It's so rich in a single word and response.

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

DONNA: Seriously?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, I really felt for Donna's loyalty here and her sense of commitment and I think they do a good job of making that more painful, more tough to accept. Y'know we feel Donna's disbelief here. By having this character Rina in the episode...?

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: ...who was strange. I actually had to spoil some stuff for myself a little bit because I couldn't understand what the character was doing.

JOSH: You wanted to check to see whether she was coming back?

HRISHI: Yeah. I had to look to see if there were more episodes. And I was temporarily relieved to find out yes, this character does come back. I mean, it was a mixed feeling because I'm not sure whether I really cared for the character.

JOSH: There's also, I noticed some pretty pre-Me Too camera work. The framing of her breasts and her rear are just [laughs] sort of weirdly these lascivious, lingering shots. And like. Dude. And then you have Toby say:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

TOBY: A walking lawsuit.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's so, I mean, why exactly. I'm not even sure what value that was supposed to bring to the episode.

HRISHI: Exactly. Yeah. And then I was wondering what was [chuckles] actually happening with this character who says, "Oh, I compile clippings over at Energy." Is there a, is this a spy? Has someone infiltrated the West Wing?

JOSH: [affected tone] Are you a *spy*?

HRISHI: [laughs] Or maybe they were all hallucinating or it was a ghost who was wandering the halls teaching people lessons about cleaning up after themselves.

JOSH: [laughs] That's pretty funny. Yeah and then there is, again. By the way, I meant it when I said I think Mark Goffman is a terrific writer and now I've been complaining about this entire episode. And it's more to me in the conception and framing of it, which I think is probably a group responsibility rather than Mark's dialogue which I think is very good. But we get that scene at the end, the person who's cleaning up, who actually knows quite a bit more than we would have given her credit for [crosstalk] about what's going on in the upper levels of government.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] It's the cover band. Yeah.

JOSH: Yes, it's just sort of... we had a little taste of that, right? From Aaron. Who was the... like Sam assistant woman?

HRISHI: Yeah. The girl from the Ashley Olsen thing.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Genuflect when you say that, mister! Oh, remember! It's Winifred Hooper.

JOSH: Oh, very good. How can you forget a name like Winifred Hooper.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Rina is a little bit of a...

JOSH: Winifred redux?

HRISHI: I mean a Winnie, Winifred Hooper redux, yeah. But I would really like to encourage everyone to watch this episode, or *re-watch* this episode, with the idea that this is a ghost.

[both laugh]

HRISHI: Um. It's like *The Sixth Sense* and we've never noticed Rina before because the halls are usually too packed with people.

JOSH: [laughs] Although I have seen old paper plates and cups fly through the air and into the dumpster. [Hrishi laughs] It always struck me as odd.

HRISHI: [inhales] Yeah.

JOSH: Well, maybe in future episodes we'll see what they were setting up, however clumsily, in this episode.

HRISHI: Mhm. I suspect we will. Josh then goes into the war room in this sort of deserted West Wing and they're gonna try to figure out what they're gonna do, and Josh speaks up on behalf of the president. He says:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: We have to call Haffley out for what he is really doing. It's a coup. He's trying to defund every Bartlet initiative we've passed in the last two years.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Again, it's pretty literal and on the nose what he's actually saying. But the dramatic point of it is, he's the only one in the room who's standing up for the president. Everyone else is reacting to this like they're in crisis mode where they have to figure out what they have to give in to, how they're gonna be able to appease Haffley, and what they can get the president to [crosstalk] swallow.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Sign off on.

HRISHI: Yeah. And he comes in on the other side and he gets sent out of the room by Leo, 'cause Leo, Angela, and Toby are the ones betting on the compromise. Plus, as we are reminded in the "previously on," Josh is still in the doghouse with the Democratic leadership

after losing Carrick, the conservative Democrat. And I remembered his name only, as stupid as it was at the time, [crosstalk] only because of “carrot stick.”

JOSH: [crosstalk] “Carrot stick.” [both chuckle] It works. It’s simple.

HRISHI: Yep. So he gets sent out of the room. Leo says, “The president has a full schedule tomorrow, Josh. Go make sure everybody knows he intends to keep it.” I mean, this is just so rough. You can see the sting of it on Josh’s face.

JOSH: I just wish he had asked him also to clean up the table.

HRISHI: [laughs] We’ve got ghosts for that.

JOSH: [chuckles] That’s right.

HRISHI: Also immediately after that moment:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

WILL: You don’t shoot a duck for quacking.

LEO: Are you speaking for the Vice President?

WILL: The quacking thing kind of gives it away, doesn’t it?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: All of these lines are played off-camera and to me somehow that makes them funnier.

JOSH: Yeah. I also have to say I was gulled by the clever little gambit there, thinking “Wow, that’s some bad dialogue they wrote” the moment before I realized it was Will paraphrasing Bingo Bob. [Hrishi laughs] I thought like wow, *that’s* what Will’s saying?

HRISHI: Right. “You don’t shoot a duck for quacking” at first seems like really bad but then it pays off.

JOSH: It’s like oh, that makes sense. That was a good payoff.

HRISHI: And I think by having the camera spin around that way to follow Josh on his way out and then C.J. on her way in, it makes them throwaway lines. And by lowering the stakes of what those are, y’know not seeing them play out on-camera, it lowers the stakes and I think that ends up making them more effective.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree.

HRISHI: Like on this show. If we were trying to tell jokes, it would be terrible. But in the service of talking about, uh...

JOSH: Right. It's *a/so* terrible.

HRISHI: [laughs] They're all throwaway lines!

JOSH: That's a very good point.

HRISHI: By making all of our discussion throwaway lines, we've elevated them.

JOSH: Right. And I think also choosing to have the podcast take place entirely off-camera.

HRISHI: Exactly! Exactly. [laughs]

JOSH: Very good choice. Um, I found another, if we can get back to the gripe-fest, please.

HRISHI: Ugh, okay.

JOSH: I found another instance of "they would have gotten there sooner" similar to my reaction to Toby's and Joe's conversations about Ashland, the Chief Justice, and my feeling that the episode was kind of bloated with unnecessary scenes. I felt that way a little bit about the scene between Leo and President Bartlet while he's watching his basketball game. I felt like that's what would have happened immediately upon President Bartlet's exit from the Mural Room, from the Roosevelt Room rather. I just think that's where they would've gotten immediately. "We've got to talk about this."

HRISH: But then we don't get a basketball metaphor.

JOSH: Well I guess that's, well, there you go. Was it worth it ultimately?

HRISH: We actually get two little giveaways from the game the president's watching, cause he says Hey, the thing that we talked about earlier, you know "they've got a seven foot center and the best power forward in the game, why zone?" Then also he says "the game is won or lost in the last five minutes. Which also made me feel like oh okay, we'll find out at the end of the episode.

JOSH: Well now that you say it, I should have taken that as a warning and skipped to the last five minutes of the episode.

HRISH: [laughing]

JOSH: I think actually President Bartlet is unintentionally criticizing the episode he's currently being featured in.

HRISHI [laughing] But it turns out he was wrong, because by the time they do finish, there's actually still ten minutes left for him to get to dinner.

JOSH: Ah.

HRISHI: They take a hundred and ten minutes, he has two hours for the State Dinner

JOSH: Well done.

HRISHI: There's a nice moment that I thought said a lot; in Leo's office, you know we've heard that Haffley is on the cover of *Time*, and then in Leo's office we actually see the magazine cover and it says "The New Boss?"

JOSH. Quick turnaround. They got that cover out. Whoo!

HRISHI: [laughing] I mean, you know, they...everybody knows that Haffley is dictating terms, I think even before this, so...

JOSH: Fair enough. They had it ready to go.

HRISHI: I think so, yeah. But so the *Time* cover says "The New Boss?" and then we see Leo turn it over...he turns it over and hides the cover as...

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: ...Bob Russell comes in...

JOSH: I noticed that, sure.

HRISHI: ...and Bob Russell is trying to make demands and dictate what he thinks the direction should be...or at least weigh in and despite Leo's own internal disagreement with the president he's got to present a strong front, and I like the idea that just having this periodical in the room...just having this other thing ...that makes it seem like there's outside voices also questioning the president's leadership. He needs to get rid of that in...

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: ...order to strengthen his...

JOSH: Do what he has to do.

BOTH: Yeah

JOSH: I agree. That is a nice touch. Here's one of my questions...here's a question I have. Why is it so quickly upon the heels of this stalemate and the imminent shut down why is it such a GOP win?

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

ROYCE: I hate November.

HAFFLEY: No, no. Christmas came early this year.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I mean in part I get that President Bartlet has abdicated the fight around optics but you know Haffley as you say was already being perceived as dictating terms. Well he didn't get what he wanted. He walked out of the room with a government shutdown.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: Why is it such a win for Haffley and a loss for the administration?

HRISHI: Because they're confident they're going to get something that they want anyway. Like, they think that they're going to get three percent. They think that the president into a corner so no matter what at some point they're going to get the budget reduction...you know, the spending reductions that they want because they just have this stronger hand. The president doesn't have the power to negotiate, Haffley thinks.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And they can go and say, "Hey look, we didn't even do this. The president...we offered him a deal. It was his decision to shut it down. So it's both his fault and then eventually when this thing gets resolved we're still going to get what we want."

JOSH: No, I understand why they GOP congress people in a room would feel that this is to their advantage, but it seems to be playing out publicly that way. Instantaneously. Why isn't an incredible amount of pressure being applied to the Republican legislators who have tripled their demand at the last moment, leading to a shutdown. Why is it just so generally accepted that it's...I...we've been in the room and so we know that President Bartlet I guess made that final decision...but why does this play out immediately in public as a GOP win? I guess what it seems to me is the reason it's playing out that way is that President Bartlet doesn't make any attempt to communicate with the public. C.J. is sent out in the dark without a word from the president and so they're just surrendering the optics of it all. I guess that's part of what I sorta found not credible, although I guess we're meant to take President Bartlet as...and there is a

weird little interchange of dialogue, when... "is there something else going on?" ... almost as if they're wondering whether he is, you know, I felt like the unspoken thing was, is he suffering dementia? Is he unable to lead? Like, what is going on?

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: So, I guess we're supposed to feel that this is an episode where from the precipice of disaster the president gets his [expletive deleted] together and starts governing again. But, it just seems so totally...it's a hard buy for me that you know normally you'd think the two sides would walk out of the room and immediately get to "How do we spin this in our favor? Look, those guys...we had a deal and those guys tripled their demands at the final moment. Obviously we couldn't accept that." But they don't make any effort to do that and hence the optics are lost.

HRISHI: Well, I think it is this line that Josh has which is nobody understands the budget process and there's active confusion or lack of information about what the real ramifications of asking for an additional two percent are. Because they say, "Oh, we were going to reduce it by one percent, they wanted three percent" and rather than be able to compromise or find...or give in to three percent, I think it's a win because people don't understand what the two percent difference is.

JOSH: But do you believe Bartlet would let that happen without trying to mount some sort of education campaign to let the public know why this was...this is an entirely unacceptable plan that the Republicans are offering?

HRISHI: But don't you think that this is what C.J. tries to do in the press room?

JOSH: Well, C.J. tries to do it, but she does it without, but she does it...you know...she does it with one scribbled figure on a legal pad. The president, the way he behaves I don't buy.

HRISHI: Hmm.

JOSH: "I'll be watching basketball."

HRISHI: Well, I think this would be a great time to take a look at how President Bill Clinton handled the situation in 1995. He had a much more hands-on approach to the shutdown. So let's take a quick break and then when we come back we'll speak to Gene Sperling.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: Joining us now is Gene Sperling. He was the Director the National Economic Council under President Bill Clinton. He worked in the White House when the 1995 shutdown happened, and he was also the Director of the National Economic Council under President Barack Obama in 2013 when that shutdown happened. In addition to that, he was an advisor on *The West*

Wing, including when they wrote this episode. We really couldn't have gotten a better guest for this episode. Gene, thank you so much for joining us.

GENE SPERLING: Oh, my pleasure.

HRISHI: Can you tell us how the idea for this episode first got introduced as far as your memory of it?

GENE: Well, what I remember was, there was interest in doing this and they wanted to really understand what it was like what had happened and I'd obviously lived through intimately the 1995-96 shutdown and so a lot of it was going through in some detail not just the details that happened but what was the feeling, what was the basic conflicts that you were facing. You've got a White House and a president who are in charge, that are dealing with the fact that their popularity is fading, that Republicans control Congress, and they're facing that conflict of on one hand they don't want to fight a losing battle and get more out of touch with the public; on the other hand, they gotta get their mojo back, they gotta look for that opportunity to turn it around and show what they're fighting for, and that playing out in this very unpredictable situation of the budget showdown.

HRISHI: In terms of the mechanics of getting your input on this episode, how did that work? Did you get a call?

GENE: There were times where I worked there where they really wanted your complete downloads; what did the pizza boxes, etc. look like? Here, I think you really are downloading everything. There's not that much written about this – there's not that much authoritative, so you're really trying to bring them into the West Wing. Now I think that one of the things they were very interested in was the unknowns when you got into a shutdown. That in 1995 when the government shutdown, we did not really know how it would work out. It wasn't really a plan. And when you go into the shutdown, one of the big issues which is portrayed in this show is who's going to be blamed. Now we were probably in the real White House more focused on that long before; I think we had long set up that Gingrich was the one who was making extreme demands. And you're also trying to set up, if there's a shutdown, why is there a shutdown? Whose side are you on? So in our case we were very much positioning the truth which was we were defending the Great Society; we were trying to set up that when a shutdown came, one, it was their fault, they were the ones being unreasonable; and number two, if people were trying to figure out why is this happening, they would think that we were on the side of "them." That we were sticking up for their Medicare, their Medicaid, their education. In the real shutdown that happened in '95, it was much more portrayed that Gingrich was very nervous when the shutdown happened. That he had told his guys that Clinton would blink, and that at a minimum he would get put into a creative block granting Medicaid. When Clinton takes this very strong, almost movie-like position that that's not going to happen, and Gingrich goes out to the microphone, he's shaken. And he in some ways never quite recovered for the rest of his speakership from judging Clinton wrong. From not having a Plan B if Clinton didn't go along. In this one, they kind of switch it around. They have Haffley going to the mic in front of the White

House more confident that they're winning, and you see the Bartlet White House more fearful that things are not going well. And they're quite passive for a long time in this episode, right? They're just kind of, "What's the matter with the president, is he out of touch? Doesn't he see the public is against us, we're losing, things are going to get worse." And they're not doing much during that episode other than trying to convince Bartlet that he's taking an unreasonable position.

HRISHI: This is Josh's biggest issue with the episode, actually.

JOSH: That's right, I was going to say in '95 you describe the situation where they are playing long or longball in sort of trying to frame the optics of it before the decision is even made so I wonder is it really credible for a president like Bartlet to make this snap decision at the moment not to take the three percent, that we'll go into shutdown and then to walk out and refuse to even discuss with his staff how they're going to move forward.

GENE: I couldn't agree with you more. You know, re-watching the episode I thought that was the worst part of it, was the implication that they would just be passive. When you're fighting so hard you would have wanted to show them, more trying to define the message and shaping it every single day, instead of just looking at the news and wondering whose getting blamed cause the Washington Monument is getting shut down. Now, I think what they tried to do is instead of doing that strategic-type of...more realistic, I think, strategy...instead, people got very enamored and I was part of the conversation on deciding that what if you showed Bartlet walking down to the Capitol. Now, that was, in a sense, a dramatic portrayal of showing the president as the one who is trying to get a deal, and when they make the mistake in the show – the Speaker makes the mistake of not receiving him, Josh is kind of on his game and says, "Let's leave." So, you know, in a sense, you could see that as a dramatic stunt that kind of shows President Bartlet as the one trying to get the deal. But even then it was without kind of the message content of who they were fighting for. So I really agree, I think it would have been a more realistic and a more interesting show to have seen that.

HRISHI: Can you tell us about the Bill Clinton/Newt Gingrich dynamic when they were face-to-face? You know, at the end of this episode, you have the president and the Speaker in the Oval Office and for two hours they sit down and they really hammer it out. But there's also some really fiery exchanges between them before they get to that resolution.

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

HAFFLEY: ...they're trapped in a failed system! I can't stand by....

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Well, I'm not going to negotiate with anyone who holds a gun to my head.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: What was the interpersonal dynamic like between Clinton and Gingrich?

GENE: Well it was an interesting interpersonal dynamic. You know Gingrich very much wanted to take down President Clinton but he also wanted his respect. He wanted Clinton to see him as a smart policy wonk in the way that Clinton was. And it was common for the two of them to launch off on a rather arcane policy issue. But I think if someone's looking for a moment where a specific sentence or line is taken from real life and put into the show, it is when Bartlet says to Haffley in the Oval:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I don't care if my approval ratings drop into single digits. I am the President...

[end excerpt]

GENE: Well, that comes from the actual meeting in the Cabinet Room on the evening of November 13th. Clinton kind of responds, "I'm never going to do your budget, I'm never going to do your Medicaid cuts, I don't care if it all comes down around me. I don't care if I go to five percent in the polls. I'm never going to sign your budget." Bill Clinton, whose mother was a nurse in rural Arkansas, knew what healthcare meant for poor people and was saying you know, "You've pushed too far. No way." And that breaks Gingrich. Gingrich has told his team that Clinton will fold in the end. He thinks that he's got intel that suggests he would go with that. And when Clinton does that, Gingrich walks out, and when you watch the tapes of him, when he leaves the White House, he's shaken. He never really has a Plan B. So in this context, it's not in the Cabinet Room, it's not with everyone. But you've now seen that Haffley has made a strategic blunder by not meeting with Bartlet when he comes up to The Hill. He's feeling a little weaker, and you do see Bartlet look at him and say, "I don't care" - he didn't say five percent - but he says, "I don't care if my popularity goes to single digits." And I think that that was in a sense perhaps supposed to reflect that moment where Haffley, as with Gingrich, realizes that they judged wrong. This guy isn't just going to be completely political, he's got a principled backbone and now you better reevaluate.

HRISHI: One of the things that Josh and I discussed about the president's position when he makes that argument in the show is that he's not going to be facing reelection.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: He's in the second term already. But that wasn't the case in the real version of this in 1995.

JOSH: Much bolder for President Clinton to take that tack.

HRISHI: Yeah.

GENE: You know, at this moment, I don't think most people, including us, think we're going to be reelected. In the 1994 congressional election, you know, it was a public humiliation. It was President Clinton loses his signature domestic program for universal health care, he's been painted as a big spending Socialist Democrat, he's rejected in the polls. Gingrich is seen by many as the most powerful person in DC, and they're steamrolling us. And so, this moment turns out to be in many ways the pivotal moment in the Clinton Presidency, but it goes to what Josh says might have been the weakness in the show. What makes it strong for Clinton, what turns him around, is just that he was better tactically in the shutdown, but that he got the policy back on his side. By saying he was for a balanced budget over a longer period of time instead of...by neutralizing that, he made the issue "Who is going to be the defender of your healthcare, your education, of the environment?" And so, it was used in a much more significant way and the perception of him changed a lot in the public as that this guy was going to be a defender, a check on powers.

JOSH: Well one thing I noticed if I'm not wrong, I think as you would expect most of the time when we get to the point of government shutdown it's because we've got an executive office inhabited by one party and a Congress of the other, am I wrong that under Jimmy Carter there were multiple shutdowns when the Democrats were in both, had the Presidency and Congress?

GENE: No, you really haven't had, there really wasn't anything like really the '95 or '96. I mean this shuts down not just for a day, it shuts down for five, six days and then it shuts down for an additional 26, 27 days. I think this is an exceptional moment at the time. You know, in 2013, the policies ended up being much tougher when they go into shutdown the public kind of blamed both the Republicans and President Obama equally. We did not know what would happen in 1995. I have to tell one story because it's too priceless.

[Crosstalk] JOSH: Of course.

GENE: So in the middle of the government shutdown in 2013, or perhaps right as it was on the edge of the negotiations of the shutdown in 2011, it was 2011, we hadn't quite shutdown yet. But we're sitting in the Oval and we're a bit surprised and shocked that the president has called Speaker Boehner, and he hasn't returned his call. And, you know he's kind of asking Jack Lew and myself, "You guys have been around for a long time, have you seen this?" And we said, "No, it's pretty unusual for someone not to return the president's call no matter how upset they are." And the president kind of sits in his chair in the Oval and says, "You know what the hell, I should just be like Bartlet, just walk down there."

JOSH & HRISH: [laughter]

HRISHI: It's so great that he had the scene ready to deploy in that moment.

GENE: Absolutely. I mean, just out of nowhere. "I should be like Bartlet and just walk on down there and knock on his door." So yeah, that was the ultimate life imitating art imitating life moment for me.

HRISHI: That's really good.

JOSH: That's fantastic.

HRISHI: I wanted to wrap up by asking you one last question that might be a little controversial and that also might be a little unfair but I'll leave it to you to decide. So last time when you spoke to us for Season 4 we talked about how in *The West Wing*, there was kind of a with the Kundunese kind of a re-writing of what happened in the Clinton administration with Rwanda and in *The West Wing* you know sort of a chance to take inspiration from that and kind of do it right. Whereas you said, you know, the Clinton administration had a lot of regrets about how that all went down. Here, the story that you've told and the way that this all happened with the shutdown in 95, President Clinton really had kind of a heroic moment here, whereas Josh has pointed out in our discussion, very poignantly, how President Bartlet was kind of doing nothing. He was just sitting there. And it took Josh really to make anything happen. So here's my question: who do you think is a better President? President Bartlet or President Clinton?

GENE: [laughing] You know, geez, I think that's like comparing Muhammad Ali to Jack Johnson. And the interesting thing that you could say about Bartlet was you could say that episode perhaps was more predictive of the next shutdown, because in the next shutdown, Obama tries to in a sense go through the types of negotiations Clinton does, and comes to the opinion, eventually, that because they're threatening to default the government, that he just can't anymore. That after he goes through the first in 2011, and then he tells all of us, "That's it. I can't do this to the office of the Presidency. You are not going to put a gun to the president or to the country's finances, to their head, we can fight all sorts of different ways, but you can't do that." So, maybe President Bartlet wasn't fighting the past war as well as Bill Clinton did, but maybe he was...maybe there was something prophetic about the way presidents, perhaps, were going to have to be going forward with an even more unreasonable Republican congress.

HRISH: Very diplomatic.

JOSH: Good answer.

[both laugh]

JOSH: Well threaded.

HRISH: Gene, thank you so much for joining us again and...

JOSH: Another great interview.

HRISH: Incredible stories.

GENE: Thanks, it's extraordinary for me to talk about this episode because it does bring you to three very important parts of one's life.

HRISHI: So happy that you're able to join us.

JOSH: It's special for us to have access to somebody like you who was there in the room. Thank you so much.

GENE: Anytime.

[end interview]

HRISHI: So there's one other part that we haven't talked about yet, which is Abbey's return. Leo, by the way, also gets in on the poker metaphor, later when he says to the president, "You're putting all our chips down on a single hand we can't win." But then he decides he has to make a call and he calls in Abbey, like Batman with matched jewelry.

JOSH: [laughs] True. Yes, she gets quite the hero entrance.

HRISHI: It's actually kind of a little bit like John Goodman's entrance, when we first see him coming into the White House shrouded in darkness and then walking through the halls and we kind of, you know...

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: [whispers] "Look who's coming...to dinner...to the State Dinner."

JOSH: [laughs] That said, what about Abbey's reappearance unlocks things for the president? What does she bring to the table, what does she bring to this particular situation?

HRISHI: Well, so Leo thinks that Abbey is going to bolster his arguments to get the president to listen to reason, and cave to Haffley's demands. But he miscalculates that. Instead, Abbey asks the president a crucial question:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

ABBEY: Jed, where's Josh?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: A question I often ask myself ten minutes before we're about to record a podcast.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: It is a crucial question and by asking that, you know, it gives a chance for the president to kind of reassess what's actually happening in his own war room and remember that he has the best power forward in the game. And so he calls him in and by the way, I love it, okay, now I'm going to mix sports metaphors, that moment where Josh gets called back up to the majors,

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: I love that he's so...ready for it.

JOSH: He's ready for it, yes.

HRISHI: The combination of Abbey getting called and then walking into the building then Josh getting the call, this feels like the nerdiest version of Ocean's 11.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: Or like The Fast and Furious, you know, "We're getting a team together..."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: "...to pass a budget."

[Both laugh]

HRISHI: I love, by the way, the most explicit sort of call back to C.J.'s figuring it out in the past:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

C.J.: Toby we've all been assuming this is the President not understanding what's really going on. He's been so out of it since Zoey, you know, and we've all been protecting him, you, me, Leo. What if it's something else?

TOBY: It's not.

C.J. But what if it is?

TOBY: Okay, it's something else. Like what?

C.J.: Leadership.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it does remind me of that moment when C.J. recognizes what the .22 caliber comment really was.

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: And it also reminds me of the C.J. and Toby conversation about Uncle Fluffy versus the president in the last debate for the last job he'll ever have, you know if he's going to show up it will be a sight to see. So again, this is a song - I love this song - but I also feel like I've heard the song before. Also, and not an explicit callback, but just going again with some basketball metaphors here, what I thought of when he tells the president to walk up to the Speaker's office but then, especially when he tells him to leave, and you see all these cameras there, I thought, Josh is telling the president to throw an elbow on a nationally televised game.

JOSH: Hmm. Ahh. Well put. Yeah.

HRISHI: But that moment also, when they're in front of the National Archives,

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: The Capitol's just a five- or ten-minute walk from here, care to stretch your legs?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm sorry folks, I've got a meeting on The Hill.

WOMAN IN CROWD: You go get them...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The president has this grin, like a grin breaks out on his face, in a way that I feel like he's sees what they're going to do and recognition I think, you know, he's got an ally who's on his side, is seeing it the way that he's going to see it, that moment for Martin Sheen is so great. And also I love how Angela Blake is surprised, and you know, seems clearly impressed with Josh's moves.

JOSH: This is the first time in a while you and I've been significantly on different pages in response to an episode.

HRISHI: That's true. Yeah, I can't disagree with any of your objections though. I just, in the moment of watching the episode, I watched it twice, I enjoyed it. But I think that all of your nitpicks are – not even nitpicks, I think your gripes are...

JOSH: Some of them are nitpicky. I mean, to me it was I think the accretion of small mishandled details that led to a feeling that I wanted to watch the better version of this episode.

HRISHI: Mmhmm.

JOSH: Even the little girl – this is really bad, this is a real nitpick.

HRISHI: Oh, the tv...

JOSH: The little girl that we see, “I wanted to go see the Smithsonian and Grandma. Now the Smithsonian is closed and I only get to see Grandma.” I was like, “She’s bad!”

HRISH: [laughing]

JOSH: I mean, sorry I hate to point out bad acting, I don’t usually, I even find something nice to say about Brad now and again, but...

HRISHI: Brad acting.

JOSH: Brad acting. Um, now that’s some Brad acting.

HRISH: [laughs]

JOSH: I thought she was bad and it was clunky, it just didn’t feel like an actual moment on the news, a little kid doing an interview; it felt like a little actress doing badly. Doing Bradley.

HRISHI: Sorry young lady.

JOSH: Doing Bradley.

HRISHI: [laughing] What is a great moment of Brad acting though? Another entry in the Brad Museum of Weird Josh Celebrations? When the president says, “We have a budget,” and he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: “Heeyaww.”

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [groan] I had to shower immediately after hearing that.

HRISHI: [laughing] Okay there’s another moment I liked for its echoes of past episodes when C.J. is telling the press about the homemade state dinner they’re going to have and she says, in addition to the well-dressed bird, not to be confused with Flamingo herself, she says the Bartlets will also be serving their guests a Colorado beet salad and California green beans. And so I

thought, shout out to “Galileo,” the president IS eating green beans although not Oregon green beans, so [expletive deleted] you, Oregon.

JOSH: [laughing] That’s good. Yeah, there’s something in my mind wanted to make that connection but I couldn’t quite do it. Knew there was something there.

HRISHI: So in the final scene between the president and Haffley...

JOSH: Where they teach each other about the basic tenets of liberalism versus conservatism, yeah, to me again, it was a little rough. I was like, “Ugh, *Schoolhouse Rock*” in this final in this ultimate, head-to-head. I don’t buy it.

HRISHI: Yeah? I mean, I feel like it’s nice to know that some people are for smaller government.

JOSH: Mmmm. Ay, yi yi.

HRISHI: [laughs] But I did really like the final volley from the president in this exchange, where he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I’m not going to negotiate with anyone who holds a gun to my head. We had a deal. I don’t care if my approval ratings drop into single digits. I am the President of the United States and I will leave this government shutdown until we reach an equitable agreement.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought, just in that last, those last few lines of this scene, the president does a lot of things in very few sentences. He starts by saying, you know, “I’m not going to negotiate with anyone who holds a gun to my head.” And I think it reiterates his position while also subtly framing Haffley as a terrorist, and they don’t negotiate with terrorists.

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: And then he says, “We had a deal.” So, now he’s making his direct confrontation about this guy went against his word, to his face, maybe trying to appeal to his sense of honor, and then he finally reveals his hand, where he says, “I don’t care if my approval ratings drop to single digits and I will leave the government shut down.” And those are stakes that Haffley just can’t afford.

JOSH: Yes. Actually, it’s interesting all of a sudden there’s a certain leverage to be utilized in being a lame duck.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He's going, "I don't really care about my legacy, you probably have more elections to run, so, let's do this."

HRISHI: Yeah. I felt like it was really nice writing, that they could do all of that in just a few sentences.

JOSH: I agree. Good save.

HRISHI: And that's the end of the exchange, the next thing we hear is that they've come to an agreement.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: In a neat twist in this episode, Josh invokes a basketball metaphor...

JOSH: Uh oh.

HRISHI: ...to tell Donna she's like the rookie who pulled down one rebound alongside Wilt Chamberlain, which reminded me of you, when the rookie said it was the proudest day of his life, together he and Wilt went for 34 points and 56 rebounds.

JOSH: I thought the same thing too, that's my Allison Janney joke. Between us, she and I have won seven Emmys.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: That's funny, I thought the exact same thing. Like maybe that's where I got the idea. I think so.

HRISHI: It's a good joke, nonetheless.

JOSH: Maybe that's where *they* got the idea.

HRISHI: Exactly. [laughs]

JOSH: So Donna's miracle pull is about the...

HRISHI: Social Security.

JOSH: Social Security, that the checks aren't going to go out?

HRISHI: She, you know, on the not laptop that's full of not porn, or whatever, when she's compiling all the departments that are being affected, she includes Social Security.

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Why did you put Social Security on the list? It's an entitlement.

DONNA: Yeah but we sent home all the people from the Social Security Administration who run the machines that cut the checks.

JOSH: Checks won't go out.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: And you know, because Josh is asking her to count up all of the programs that are affected by the shutdown, and I think that this is one of the pieces of ammo that they can use in both their negotiations as well as in the public fight.

JOSH: I guess I just wondered about that little subplot how they would have been caught off-guard about that particular point, there having been governments shutdowns before. Going back to Reagan's. How would they have not caught this on their own? How would they not have been entirely ready for this?

HRISHI: There was no Reagan in *The West Wing* universe.

JOSH: Fair enough. There's no anybody.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I mean, they certainly don't establish that this has never happened before, that this is the first government shutdown, so I don't know why they need Donna to catch something that humongous.

HRISHI: Well, I mean, I guess we should say it's not that there wasn't "anybody." There was Seward, at least.

JOSH: [laughing]

HRISHI: There was Aaron Burr. There was Seward, there was the Interview at Weehawken we know about Aaron Burr.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: I mean, I think again the greater point here is that Donna continues her path of being a hero. She's done...

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: ...really well with Angela Blake. She's a person who knows the documents inside and out and it's just reinforcing this idea that Donna really, she goes above and beyond the scope of her position.

JOSH: You are really willing to overlook a lot in order to enjoy this episode.

HRISH: [laughs] I guess I was. I mean...

JOSH: Which is actually a good way to be.

HRISHI: I didn't know that I was overlooking it.

JOSH. That's good, yay! We're getting back to the old days where I would try to ruin an episode for you.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Also, thinking of...I remember now when I first got that moment about "Don't take my laptop," I thought there may have been "billet-doux," if that is the correct phrase for love-letters, that the idea is maybe there was something Josh and Donna-related on the laptop.

HRISH: Ohhh.

JOSH: Maybe he had started...

HRISHI: [Cross talk] Josh has been writing fan-fic about himself, and Donna or on Lemon-Lyman

JOSH: [laughs] or a love letter he never sent...get your mind out of the gutter

HRISHI: [laughing] He's on the message boards, on Lemon-Lyman, saying "here's my new [unintelligible]"

JOSH: Entirely possible. That wraps it up for this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thank you for listening, thanks to Margaret Miller and Zach McNees.

HRISHI: Thanks to our guest Gene Sperling. You can follow Gene Sperling on Twitter @GeneBSperling and you can follow us @WestWingWeekly. We are also on Facebook and

Instagram and we have a website, it's called thewestwingweekly.com. I guess it would be weird if this were the first episode you ever heard and therefore this was the first time you ever got this information. But I'm saying it anyway.

JOSH: Right. You can buy stuff at thewestwingweekly.com/merch or you can cut out the middleman and just send us your money...

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: ...for creating this wonderful podcast by going to westwingweekly.com/donate. Is that right?

HRISHI: That's right, actually! I forgot that people could do that, I thought you were making a joke.

[Cross talk]

JOSH: We'll take cold-hard cash, c'mon. We're giving it to you for nothing.

HRISHI: Aww, that's too bad. I really was picturing...

JOSH: I say, I would recommend...

HRISHI: ...[inaudible] with quarters in them.

JOSH: I would recommend a donation of five dollars per episode you've listened to. That seems fair. Remember, I only get \$2.50.

HRISHI: [laughing] Well, thanks so much for listening. Quarters or no. We've been your ghosts

JOSH: Oooooo. See you next tiiiiimme.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

GENE: What's next?

[Outro Music]